

Conference proceedings: *Awareness and Action – University Museums Today*, September 25 – October 1, 2005, Uppsala, Sweden

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The history of the Bergen Museum

In 1946, Norway's National Assembly, Stortinget, decided to establish a second Norwegian university in Bergen, Norway's second largest city, situated on the country's west coast. The new university was based on two pre-existing institutions: 1) a hospital owned by the municipality of Bergen, and 2) Bergen Museum, which was a private institution, although to a large extent funded by public means.

This paper will not focus on the foundation of the university as such, but will give an outline of the history of the Bergen Museum from its creation in 1825 up until its centenary in 1925. By that time the embryo of two faculties existed at the Museum: a faculty of sciences and a faculty of arts. However, I want to emphasize that without the existence of the Bergen Museum, it is almost certain that no university would have been established in Bergen until the increase in student numbers during the 1960s triggered new universities all over the Western world¹. This paper will focus on the function of the Bergen Museum and describe how the Museum gradually changed from an antiquarian oriented institution to a modern research oriented institution, in which dissemination of knowledge to the general public held a special place. By the time of its centenary, the Bergen Museum was strongly embedded in Bergen society, especially bourgeois society, but the interaction reached wider than that, and I shall argue that the university cause acted as a motor for integration as well as for internal change².

¹ A. Forland, *Universitetet i Bergens historie 1946–1996* [in:] A. Forland & A. Haaland, *Universitetet i Bergens historie*, vol. I, p. 190–546, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen 1996.

² The last point is emphasized in A. Haaland, 1996. *Bergens Museums historie 1825–1945* [in:] A. Forland & A. Haaland, *Universitetet i Bergens historie*, vol. I, p. 10–186, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen.

First period: W.F.K. Christie's time: An antiquarian focus³

At its inception in 1825, the Bergen Museum was in reality a private club, the initiators of which had extended invitations to both the townspeople of Bergen and non-residents of Bergen to join a museum association. The aim was to establish a museum containing a collection of antiquities and a cabinet of curiosities of nature, whether in the form of minerals, plants or animals. Thus, from the outset the Museum contained these two collections, which again laid the basis for the later establishment of a historical-antiquarian and a natural history department. In addition, the collection soon included contemporary items, like paintings, plastic arts and craft objects.

Due to the fact that scientific research was mentioned as an objective, the plans for the museum that were presented in the invitation mentioned above have sometimes been described as modern and forward-looking. However, there is good reason to maintain, as several people have done that the activities of the museum board from its inception until Christie's death at the end of the 1840s, and even beyond that date, had a typical antiquarian focus.

The distinguished Italian historiographer, Arnaldo Momigliano, describes the archetypal antiquarian of the sixteenth century as a magistrate and a member of parliament, a bachelor, an inveterate traveller, far more so than his shaky health and his duties should have allowed. When he died, he left behind collections of books, medals, plants, minerals, scientific instruments, and what not⁴. This description fits in well with Wilhelm Frimann Koren Christie's characteristics (il. I). He even was a bachelor, although one with two children born out of wedlock during his student days in Copenhagen. Yet the important thing is that it was Christie who dreamt up the Bergen Museum, who took the initiative leading to its creation, who recruited people for its board and its cause, who corresponded with foreign institutions, such as the British Museum and its Danish counterpart, the National Museum, and with both foreign and domestic collectors. As the county governor of Hordaland, Christie travelled a lot and he used his travels to build and expand his own collection. Due to a shaky health he retired as county governor, and it was at this point that he started his work for the museum cause. Christie had an exceptional social stature, which he could use to rally people to the cause. He had been a delegate to the elected assembly that wrote Norway's constitution in 1814, in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. He was elected the first President of the Storting, and he was a member of the initial ordinary assemblies of the Storting in 1815 and 1818.

Christie was without question the dominant figure among the board members, although a bishop and a schoolmaster were also very active members. The board in addition included two apothecaries and a language teacher. The board's main objective was

³ Unless otherwise indicated, this section is based on J. Brunchorst, 1900. *Bergens Museum 1825–1900. En historisk fremstilling*. Grieg, Bergen; H. Christensen, 1912. *Universitetes Bergensis*, Grieg, Bergen; A. Haaland, 1996. *Bergens Museums historie 1825–1945* [in:] A. Forland & A. Haaland, *Universitetet i Bergens historie*, vol. I, p. 10–186, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen; and H.E. Lidén, 2002. *Fra antikvitetsamling til historisk museum. En renningstråd i den bergenske universitetsveven*, *Bergens Museums Skrifter*, no. 13, p. 79–86.

⁴ A. Momigliano, *The Classical Foundation of Modern Historiography*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1990.

to expand the collections. At the outset the Museum did not have its own building, and a room had to be borrowed from a secondary school. From 1832, when the first museum building was acquired, the collections were occasionally opened to the general public. But generally, access was limited to members of the museum association, donors, and foreign guests. Cataloguing the collections took up much of the board members' time, and eventually they started to use the collections as a basis for articles. During a period of ten years, Christie and his closest collaborators published an antiquarian journal called *URDA*. Both the cataloguing and the articles published in *URDA* during this first period reflected the antiquarian interest of the board members in the systematic description of objects.

Second period: D. Danielssen and the pioneering of scientific research⁵

Daniel Danielssen was Bergen's foremost institution builder within the field of science during the second half of the nineteenth century. He became a member of the Museum board in 1852, and was president of the board from 1864 until he died 30 years later.

Danielssen was a medical doctor by profession, and an internationally renowned leprosy researcher. He was the tutor of Armauer Hansen, who discovered the leprosy bacillus and also became a board member. Danielssen also co-wrote several dissertations on zoology, and his passionate interest for this science was to influence the direction that the Museum took during his presidency.

Danielssen's main aim as president was to turn the Museum into a modern scientific institution. He was decidedly not an antiquarian. He advocated and pushed through a strong separation between the natural history collection and the antiquarian one, and would have liked to get rid of the latter altogether. Given the previous emphasis in this field, this was not possible, but he gave away the picture collection to a municipal picture gallery, while other objects went to a newly established Arts and Crafts Museum. Danielssen was also involved in the establishment of a Society for the advancement of Norwegian fisheries, to which he transferred Bergen Museum's collection of fishery related objects.

The upshot was a concentration of the activities at the Museum. It was to a large extent due to Danielssen's audacity that the board acquired public means to build a new building, which was opened in 1864 and remains the symbol not only of the Museum but of the subsequent University of Bergen as well. The last decade of Danielssen's reign saw a breakthrough for the Museum as a scientific institution. During the 1870s and especially the 1880s, professional researchers, including archaeologists and zoologists, for the first time joined the staff. He also appointed Fridtjof Nansen to do oceanographic research, but lost him when Nansen became a famous explorer. Finally, in the early 1890s, the establishment of a marine biological station represented a breakthrough for marine biology at the Museum.

⁵ The following section is based on J. Brunchorst 1900, *op.cit.*; H. Christensen 1912, *op.cit.* and A. Haaland 1996, *op.cit.*

Third period: Jørgen Brunchorst and the dissemination of knowledge

Jørgen Brunchorst joined the Museum in 1886 as a conservator after completing botanical studies in Germany, including a doctorate from Leipzig. He quickly became the leading light at the museum. He initiated marine biology, oversaw a two-winged expansion of the museum building, and laid out a botanical garden. He was the first professional director of the museum's collections. In 1901, he was appointed director of the Museum, a post he held until his resignation six years later.

More than anything, Brunchorst concentrated his efforts on making dissemination of knowledge an integral and essential part of the activities at the museum. The creation of a botanical garden was part of his outward reach. The museum staff was encouraged to publish in the Museum's *Yearbook*, Brunchorst himself edited *Naturen*, a journal popularising scientific results. Most importantly, Brunchorst took charge of an association called The Society for the Advancement of Scientific Endeavours, which in line with Auguste Comte's ideas organized popular lectures⁶. The establishment of this Society was Danielssen's undertaking, but once Danielssen had passed away, Brunchorst closed the society and incorporated the popular lectures into the Museum's activities. When the museum building was enlarged, a large lecture hall was added to the building, providing the premises for these lectures, which at the turn of the last century could attract audiences as large as nearly 10,000 people every six months⁷.

Brunchorst's passionate involvement and interest in the dissemination of knowledge to a broad public, and probably also his success in doing this, meant that he was not keen on developing the Museum into a university. He would rather have seen it become some sort of teacher's training school or college. His view on this matter was not widely shared, which led to his resignation in 1906⁸.

Fourth period: the Bergen University cause⁹

It was in the 1890s that the Museum board adopted the idea of developing the Museum into a university. Initially, the board sought in various ways to attract external means for the Museum. For example, a donation from the city's richest merchant enabled the establishment of a chair in zoology. However, the expansion of the Museum was a very gradual process.

In 1913 the cause for a university had a break-through when the department heads at the Bergen Museum received professor status. World War I provided another breakthrough. The war increased the income of Bergen's merchants, especially ship owners, and parts of these new riches were diverted to the Museum to support its de-

⁶ For more on this, see A. Forland & E. Hovland, *Ei bru over fagsskilja* [in:] A. Forland, E. Hovland, H.E. Lidén, P.M. Jørgensen, L.C. Olsen, P.M. Haugen, J. Aall and H.J. Jakhelln Dyvik, *Forskningsformidling gjennom 75 år. Selskapet til Vitenskapenes Fremme 1927–2002*, „Bergen Museums Skrifter”, 2002, no. 13, p. 5–58.

⁷ A. Forland *et al.*, 2002, *op.cit.*

⁸ For more on this, see A. Haaland, *Bergens Museums historie 1825–1945* [in:] A. Forland & A. Haaland, *Universitetet i Bergens historie*, vol. I, p. 10–186, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen 1996.

⁹ When not otherwise indicated, this section is based on Forland & Haaland, 1996.

velopment towards a university. The bonanza bred optimism, and plans were made to establish a university in connection with the centenary of the Museum in 1925. The plans included new buildings and an expansion of the academic staff. The most important new research environment was the Geophysics Institute, which attracted Vilhelm Bjerknes to Bergen. Bjerknes was soon able to establish the scientific paradigm that became known as the Bergen School of Meteorology¹⁰. By the early 1920s, plans had been developed for the creation of a faculty of sciences, based on the Bergen Museum, and a faculty of medicine based on the municipal hospital. In 1923, a public meeting with participants from the University of Oslo as well as from many parts of western Norway was held to further the cause. At this meeting, the public demand for a faculty of arts was so strong that it could not be ignored and it was duly incorporated into the existing plans.

However, in spite of the significant progress made, the dire economic developments of the 1920s and early 30s prevented the university from being established, although several new buildings were added to the Museum in connection with its centenary.

It was not until the economy improved in the second half of the 1930s that the university cause was reawakened and brought to fulfilment after the war.

The integration of the Bergen Museum into Bergen's bourgeois society

One very important consequence of the university cause was that it strengthened the interaction between the Museum and the city as well as the region in which it was situated. The idea of establishing a university in Bergen had not originated with the museum. It took several decades from the time the idea was launched in Bergen's newspapers until the Bergen Museum took it up at the end of Danielssen's presidency. From that time on, it really became a cause rallying support from local politicians, newspapers, schoolmasters, academics and the enlightened public in general, attracting private funds to the Museum. Internally it became a motor for change and development, and it provided direction for the museum's development¹¹. As mentioned before, it is doubtful whether a university would have been established in Bergen until the 1960s, had it not been for this general rallying for the cause.

The mobilisation for the university cause in the run-up to the centenary of the museum can be seen as the culminating point in the Museum's interaction with the city and the region. It can also be seen as the conclusion of a development that started during Danielssen's presidency and gained momentum during Brunchorst's directorship.

Concluding remarks

As we have seen, the Bergen Museum began more or less as a private club for amateurs. Access to the collections was normally restricted to members of the museum

¹⁰ For more on this, see R.M. Friedman, *Appropriating the Weather. Vilhelm Bjerknes and the Construction of a Modern Meteorology*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London 1989.

¹¹ A. Forland & A. Haaland, 1996, *op.cit.*

association, donors, or foreign guests. Once a year, at Whitsun to be precise, the collections would be opened to the public. Danielssen understood that for the Museum to obtain public support, the Museum had to be opened to the public on a permanent basis. The new building, opened during the 1860s, made this possible. In many other respects, Danielssen's focus on turning the Museum into a research institution did not strengthen the Museum's links to the city, at least not initially. As we have seen, he diverted important parts of the museum's collections to other institutions. Danielssen also played an important role in setting up a number of associations for the purpose of spreading scientific knowledge, but again he did so outside the Museum.

In the course of the 1870s and 1880s, the Bergen Museum, and not least its board, became a stronghold for Darwinism as well as Positivism. The journal *Naturen* under the editorship of Brunchorst became a vehicle for popularising knowledge about Darwin's paradigm¹². Its reception by the Bergen bourgeoisie was mixed, and it probably did not help the Museum's standing in the city in the short run. In the long run, the positivist message of Auguste Comte arguably became part of the ethos of the Museum, and contributed significantly to embedding the Museum in Bergen society as well as in the region.

The positivist ideology influenced the function of the museum in two major ways. Firstly, the positivist doctrine emphasized the link between research and the potential users of the scientific results. This kind of thinking had a profound bearing on the museum's ethos, and resulted in a concentration of research on the Vestlandet region, that is, the south-western part of Norway, with the objective that it should benefit fishermen, farmers and the like. The sciences thus came to focus on oceanography, marine biology, meteorology and forestry, whereas the linguists studied the dialects and names of the region¹³.

Secondly, Brunchorst made the dissemination of knowledge to the general public, both in the form of publishing and lecturing, an essential part of the activities at the Museum. Brunchorst himself left the Museum in 1906, but the tradition he had initiated continued and when new media like the radio appeared, it was immediately put to good use¹⁴.

The adherence to the positivist doctrine also reflected the fact that the Museum was an environment for progressive political thought in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both Danielssen and Brunchorst were elected to the National Assembly, and Brunchorst served as a minister. Board members often had political experience. In addition the Museum also had a Council to which persons who had done the museum special services were appointed. During the first decades of the twentieth century, two former prime ministers were appointed to the Council.

The ethos established at the end of the nineteenth century came to have a bearing on the Act regulating the University of Bergen in that it introduced an Objects Clause, a novelty for a Norwegian university. The Objects Clause not only strongly emphasized the importance of research, in addition to education, but included „dissemination

¹² L. Bliksrud, G. Hestmark & T. Rasmussen, *Vitenskapens utfordringer 1850–1920, Norsk idéhistorie*, vol. IV, Oslo 2002.

¹³ A. Forland & A. Haaland, 1996, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

of scientific knowledge among the populace”¹⁵. Needless to say, Brunchorst would have been pleased.

The intention behind this clause was seemingly to maintain the traditionally close contacts with the city and the surrounding region. Whether this in fact happened is a different matter. It is, however, interesting to note that research interest in the region made the orientation of the sciences at the University of Bergen well-equipped when North Sea oil and gas production and fish farming became linchpins of the Norwegian economy¹⁶.

STRESZCZENIE

Historia Muzeum w Bergen

Niniejsza praca przedstawia historię Muzeum w Bergen od jego założenia w 1825 roku aż do ustanowienia uniwersytetu w roku 1946. W tym okresie funkcja muzeum zmieniała się diametralnie. U progu nowego stulecia muzeum wykształciło charakterystyczny profil, przykładając szczególną wagę zarówno do badań naukowych, jak i rozpowszechniania wiedzy, a tym samym tworząc podstawy dla uniwersytetu, który został utworzony później.

W artykule podkreśla się, że jedynym, niezmiennie ważnym czynnikiem w rozwoju muzeum był fakt, iż było ono mocno zakorzenione w mieszczańskiej społeczności Bergen.

¹⁵ Quoted (in translation) after A. Forland 1996, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

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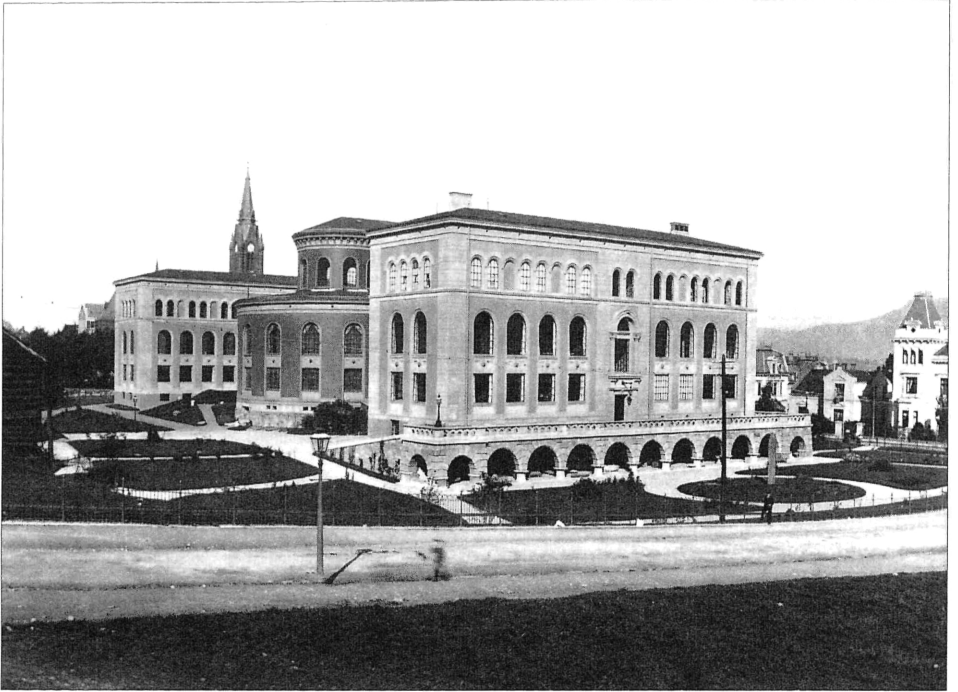
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II. 1. The Bergen Museum ca. 1900 (photo by Knut Knudsen, courtesy of the Bergen Museum, University of Bergen)



Il. I. The founder of the Bergen Museum, W.F.K. Christie, painted by Emil A.T. Lehmann in 1843 (photo by Svein Skare, courtesy of the Bergen Museum, University of Bergen)